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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000128

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [CASC](#) [ASEC](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: TENSIONS MOUNTING WITH TWO WEEKS TO GO TO

REFERENDUM

CARACAS 00000128 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: With just over two weeks to go before President Chavez's February 15 referendum to remove term limits, tensions are high with near daily confrontations between student protesters and the police. Chavez continues to foment political polarization and is warning that if the amendment fails, the country will degenerate into civil war. Although there have been few serious injuries, clashes between students and government supporters or security forces could escalate quickly into violence. Former Minister of Defense Raul Baduel and the Catholic Church -- both active in the defeat of Chavez's 2007 constitutional referendum package -- are sharply criticizing the government's "Yes" campaign. End Summary.

CHAVEZ: NO ABSTENTIONISM

¶2. (SBU) Chavez continues to flood the airwaves with demands for careful organization among his grassroots supporters and threatens that losing in February will mean civil war come 2012. In his third weekly article entitled "Cavalry!!" published January 29 in numerous local dailies, Chavez laid out a step-by-step plan for his supporters on election day. He asked that Chavista grassroots "patrols" coordinate on February 15 to have representatives in each voting center and to have a list of voters registered at that site in order to account for -- and if necessary round up -- all voters for each given balloting location. He also urged voter mobilization of beneficiaries of government-run social programs. Two days prior, Chavez threatened that if the referendum fails in February, the opposition will retake power when his term expires in 2012, eliminate the social missions, and the country will dissolve into civil war.

¶3. (SBU) The radical pro-government "La Piedrita" group continues to engage in political violence, launching tear gas attacks against perceived Chavez enemies. Pro-opposition daily El Universal reported January 29 that the group had "kidnapped" Secretary of Culture in the Caracas Mayor's office, Victor Carrillo. The group accused Carrillo of "invading revolutionary spaces," presumably a reference to the incoming opposition Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma, who replaced Chavez loyalist Aristobulo Isturiz following the November 2008 state and local elections. The group also reportedly threw tear gas at the private Monte Avila law school on January 28.

STUDENTS LEADING THE OPPOSITION

¶4. (C) Student protests continue on a daily basis across Venezuela, many eventually dispersed with tear gas and water cannons by the police. Several students have been arrested and a number injured in scuffles with Chavistas and the police. A source told Polcouns that a student activist in Merida was fatally shot while riding his motorcycle home, although it is unclear if the murder was criminally or politically motivated. In Maturin, the capital of Monagas State, local press reported that five students were arrested during a January 27 protest against the referendum.

¶5. (SBU) Minister of the Interior Tarek El Aissami denied that National Guardsmen and a tank entered the physical property of the National Experimental University (Unet) in Tachira State January 26. Unet Rector Jose Vicente Sanchez insisted the National Guard was guilty of "breaking and entering" and of violating the school's autonomy. Students released photos of a National Guard unit dispersing students 80 meters inside the campus. Most private universities in Venezuela have their own security forces and the police are legally barred from entering without permission. El Aissami called the students "immoral" and "fascists" for not joining the "real" student struggle.

¶6. (SBU) An opposition-dominated forum held at the Catholic University of Venezuela (UCV) January 28 ended in physical confrontation after a group of Chavista students entered the room shouting "Ledezma, student killer!" The forum included the mayors of El Hatillo, Baruta, Chacao, and Sucre municipalities, and Miranda State Governor Henrique Capriles Radonski. One opposition student was seriously injured.

CARACAS 00000128 002.2 OF 002

Chavista students claimed that the interruption was to protest their purported exclusion from the event and Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma's alleged killing of a student, Sergio Rodriguez, in 1993.

¶7. (C) Amazonas State student leader Jose Antonio Castro told poloff January 28 that he was coordinating his efforts with other student activists across Venezuela using his Blackberry -- which he believed to be "secure" from BRV eavesdropping -- and through the monthly meetings of the university student federation (FCU). He complained nevertheless that their activism was limited by a lack of local funding, since the Amazonas government is dominated by Chavistas. Castro also claimed that a fellow student activist with respiratory problems had recently died as a result of being tear gassed during a protest.

BADUEL AND THE CHURCH SPEAK UP

¶8. (SBU) Former Minister of Defense Raul Baduel spoke out against Chavez January 28 via radio after two months of silence, condemning the GBRV's response to student protests as a "sign of weakness and anti-democratic spirit." He added that Chavez is seeking to be president-for-life and that he "scorns the majority will of the Venezuela people who said 'No' in December (2007)." Baduel contended that 80 percent of the military feel "loyal" to the Constitution and to the defense of Venezuelan democracy. Pro-opposition media outlet Globovision reported January 29 that a "storm of tear gas and shots" were fired at an anti-amendment forum held at the University of Carabobo. The shots were allegedly targeting Baduel, who was in attendance. His car was struck 50 times by gunfire, according to an observer.

¶9. (SBU) The Venezuelan Episcopal Conference released a communique January 28 urging the GBRV to protect and respect

the human rights of all citizens, regardless of their political inclination. The statement condemned the "excessive" use of police force against university student protesters and recent attacks by pro-government radical group "La Piedrita" against the Church, opposition political parties, and pro-opposition media outlets.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) In the run-up to the referendum, tensions are mounting as Chavez continues to insist that his very political survival is tied to the referendum's success in February. He is all but inciting physical confrontations by inviting "true" student (Chavista) activists to take to the streets and by not strongly denouncing the actions of radical groups, whose access to highly controlled tear gas suggests a GBRV connection. Students aside, the opposition continues to be unable to mount an equally active campaign in favor of the "No" vote, although the voices of Baduel and the Church carry some weight in Venezuela. Minister of the Interior El Aissami's flat denial that the National Guard illegally entered the Unet campus -- undoubtedly in full view of dozens of witnesses -- is another chink in the GBRV's democratic legitimacy. Ironically, many Cabinet members are former student activists who rose to prominence for protesting similar police violations in their youth. End comment.
CAULFIELD